



## INCLUSIVE SOCIETY INSTITUTE

### Op-ed

#### **G20 Human Rights Barometer: A red flag for global accountability** *By André Gaum & Daryl Swanepoel*

The present is marked by democratic backsliding and human rights violations around the globe; it is in this spirit that, as part of the Inclusive Society Institute's (ISI) focus on human rights at the global level, the ISI has created the Human Rights Barometer for G20 Countries.

This initiative, part of ISI's work as a member of the T20, offers a helpful tool to evaluate how some of the world's most powerful economies work to support fundamental civil and political rights. The barometer is not just an academic exercise — it is a call to action. It serves as an empirical basis for civil society organisations, policymakers, and international bodies to demand accountability and shape policy reforms. Pointing out both successes and failures, the barometer is also an opportunity to chart progress and caution against backtracking on human rights protections in G20 countries.

#### **Why the Barometer matters**

The G20 members, whether through collective governance, economic policy, or international human rights norms, comprise a major proportion of the world, and as such, have great influence. These states, for example, signed and ratified major international human rights treaties, such as the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR) and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). Ratification, however, is not enough — delivery and enforcement are the gaps where many of the G20 countries stumble. The Human Rights Barometer is a systematic, evidence-based tool for gauging compliance with civil and political rights within these countries.

The barometer focuses on 10 civil and political rights categories, ranging from the rights to life and equality, to the protection of human rights defenders and more. These rights form the structural basis for democratic governance and personal liberties. The barometer creates a human rights matrix, through which the 10 rights categories are analysed and scored out of 5. Through this approach, the barometer is able to develop a holistic view on compliance levels in each of these areas, thus providing a comprehensive overview of human rights performance among members of the G20.

#### **Key findings: A mixed picture**

By G20 standards, the Human Rights Barometer shows significant differences in human rights behaviour. Although some score highly on press freedom, judicial independence, and anti-discrimination legislation, other countries show significant red flags regarding government surveillance, assembly restrictions, and political repression.

There are countries which do well like Canada and Germany on the protection of freedoms of expression and judicial independence, and others like Russia and Saudi Arabia which are heavily criticised for repressing dissent and political opposition. The United States, frequently considered an exemplar of democratic ideals, has scored lower in other areas such as concerns around voter

suppression and continued systemic racial discrimination. Emerging economies like India, Brazil, and South Africa are mixed bags — even as strong constitutional protections for human rights are established on paper, enforcement remains inconsistent and, often, politicised. The barometer also shows the increasing threats to human rights defenders present across the globe. The targeting of journalists in Mexico and crackdowns on civil society in China are just some of the conditions facing human rights activists in several G20 countries that operate in a context in which they face swelling hostility, despite international commitments to protect those working to prevent and punish human rights abuses.

### **Why this matters for the G20**

The G20 is more than an economic forum — it is also an institution that shapes international governance. If they do not lead by example regarding the situation of human rights, G20 nations compromise the very cornerstones of international law and democratic principles.

Violations of human rights are not solely moral issues: They carry concrete economic and social costs. Countries that uphold strong human rights protections enjoy healthier political environments, better public trust, and stronger economies. The opposite happens in countries that erode such rights, usually triggering social unrest and sapping investor confidence and economic growth. The conclusions of the Human Rights Barometer should be a wake-up call for G20 leaders. As the world struggles with rising authoritarianism, overreach of digital surveillance, and attacks on free speech, the G20 urgently needs to reaffirm its commitment to human rights — not as a rhetorical position but as a policy priority.

### **What needs to happen next?**

The results from the Human Rights Barometer must be an agenda item in G20 forums, and member states should pledge to concrete improvements.

G20 members should ensure that laws protecting civil and political rights are not only passed but enforced, with independent judicial oversight.

Governments should decriminalise dissent and protect human rights defenders from persecution. It is, of course, a bitter loser's game, and we shall be back in the race soon enough.

The barometer issues are largely, if not always, a result of government transparency. Improving access to information laws and press freedoms can strengthen the fight against corruption and authoritarian drift.

The G20 should set a high bar for pushback against trends toward authoritarianism among its membership. Such silence or inaction in response to human rights abuses allows for further degradation of global human rights standards.

### **A call for action**

As the top tier of the world's economies and members of a global coalition aimed at, among other things, reducing poverty and inequality and promoting global governance reforms, G20 nations have an obligation to maintain the highest standards of human rights. The barometer provides a clear, evidence-based assessment of where progress is — and what leaders must do. We urge the G20 to seize this moment and use it as a springboard for future positive transformations. Human rights should

not be a privilege for the few but a universal standard that all countries must adhere to. If the G20 really means to lead the world, it must make human rights a priority in its agenda.

***This article draws on the G20 Human Rights Barometer published by the Inclusive Society Institute. André Gaum is a former Commissioner of the South African Human Rights Commission. Daryl Swanepoel is the Chief Executive Officer of the Inclusive Society Institute.***